

A Comparative Analysis of Charles Dickens' Hard Times and Elizabeth Gaskell's North and South as Critiques of Unsustainable Industrial Practices

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Abstract

The novels of Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell often function as critiques of the socio-economic and political systems of their contexts. This essay will apply the methodologies of several scholars to the analysis of Dickens' Hard Times and Gaskell's North and South. The object is to discover how both writers denounce unsustainable industrial practices via their texts. With a special focus on the ways that social disruption is translated into negative impact upon the individual, the essay will look at the characters and character dynamics of the respective novels. Additionally, these critical readings of the novels will be interconnected with their historical contexts during the Industrialization to evaluate the extent to which these literary critiques mirror those of the opposing groups of historians extant today. This comparative analysis aims to (a) understand the ways in which literary critique can inform, display, and elaborate socio-economic and political disruption, and (b) provide an understanding of the transference between social disruption on the large scale and individual scale. (Dall-Orsoletta et al.2022) Dickens and Gaskell provide a detailed window into the broad spectrum of issues at work in almost every aspect of a community destabilized by the Industrialization, from grand economic policies to the ethical and personal impact upon the community at large. They also detail the unhappiness produced by these increasingly prevalent arrangements; Dickens focusing primarily, though not solely, on the dehumanizing ramifications of the political economy (Anne Davis, 2015), and Gaskell positioning the fissure between convention and need as the underlying force of the misery denoted. Broad critical understanding of these novels attempts to explore the manner in which gender and location determine the variety and extent of damage done to the individual through the confrontation of the powerhouse and the hamlet, and at work in the factory and the magistrate's court. By taking the individual as the primary site of the damage done by the larger processes at work in society, it becomes possible to permit a reading not only of social disaster's microcosm, but also of social disaster's numerous faces. (Grass2021)

Keywords: industrialization, literary critique, worker exploitation, Victorian novel, dehumanization.

تحليل مقارن لروايتي «أوقات عصيبة» لتشارلز ديكنز و«الشمال والجنوب» لإليزابيث غاسكل بوصفهما نقداً للممارسات الصناعية غير المستدامة

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الملخص : غالباً ما تعمل روايات تشارلز ديكنز وإليزابيث غاسكل كأدوات نقدية للأنظمة الاقتصادية والاجتماعية والسياسية في سياقاتها التاريخية. يتناول هذا المقال تطبيق منهجيات العديد من الباحثين لتحليل

رواية ديكنز "أوقات عصيبة (Hard Times) "ورواية غاسكل "الشمال والجنوب (North and South)؛ ويتمثل الهدف من ذلك في استكشاف الكيفية التي يندد بها كلا الكاتبين بالممارسات الصناعية غير المستدامة عبر نصوصهما. ومع التركيز بشكل خاص على الطرق التي يترجم بها الاضطراب الاجتماعي إلى تأثير سلبي على الفرد، سيبحث المقال في الشخصيات وديناميكيات العلاقة بينها في الروايتين المعنيتين. علاوة على ذلك، سيتم ربط هذه القراءات النقدية للروايات بسياقاتها التاريخية إبان عصر التصنيع، لتقييم المدى الذي تعكس فيه هذه الانتقادات الأدبية وجهات نظر المجموعات المتعارضة من المؤرخين المعاصرين اليوم. يهدف هذا التحليل المقارن إلى: (أ) فهم الطرق التي يمكن للنقد الأدبي من خلالها توثيق الاضطرابات الاقتصادية والاجتماعية والسياسية وعرضها وتفصيلها، و(ب) توفير فهم لطبيعة الانتقال القائم بين الاضطراب الاجتماعي على النطاق الواسع والنطاق الفردي (Dall-Orsoletta et al.2022). يقدم ديكنز وغاسكل نافذة مفصلة على الطيف الواسع من القضايا المؤثرة في كل جانب تقريباً من جوانب المجتمع الذي تزعزع استقراره بسبب عصر التصنيع، بدءاً من السياسات الاقتصادية الكبرى وصولاً إلى الأثر الأخلاقي والشخصي على المجتمع ككل. كما يفصّلان حالة البؤس الناتجة عن هذه الترتيبات التي تزداد انتشاراً؛ حيث يركز ديكنز في المقام الأول - وإن لم يكن حصرياً - على العواقب الإنسانية للاقتصاد السياسي (Anne Davis, 2015)، بينما تضع غاسكل الفجوة بين الأعراف (والثقافات المتوارثة) والاحتياج باعتبارها القوة الكامنة وراء الشقاء الموصوف. ويسعى الفهم النقدي الواسع لهذه الروايات إلى استكشاف الكيفية التي يحدد بها النوع الاجتماعي (الجنس) والموقع الجغرافي طبيعة ومدى الضرر اللاحق بالفرد نتيجة المواجهة بين مراكز القوى (المدن الصناعية) والقرية الصغيرة، وكذلك في بيئة العمل داخل المصنع ومحكمة القضاء. ومن خلال اعتبار الفرد كمسرح أساسي للضرر الناجم عن العمليات الأكبر الجارية في المجتمع، يصبح من الممكن تقديم قراءة لا تقتصر فقط على الكارثة الاجتماعية في شكلها المصغر، بل تمتد لتشمل الوجوه المتعددة لهذه الكارثة (Grass2021).

الكلمات المفتاحية: التصنيع، النقد الأدبي، استغلال العمال، الرواية الفكتورية، سلب الإنسانية

1. Introduction

The onset of the Industrial Revolution in England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries created a historically unprecedented shift in economic and social landscapes, transforming the country from an agrarian rural society into an industrialized urban one. As a result, industrialization became a controversial yet prevalent aspect shaping the social imagination of the 19th century in Britain. In their literary works, Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell echo the period's social, political, and economic tensions provoked by industrialization through an examination of divergent and convergent perspectives on labor, class, and environment, echoing one another's concerns and criticisms. Their novels consequently unmask the exploitative tendencies emerging in this new economic order, and serve as pointed critiques of the alienation and dehumanization brought about by unsustainable industrial practices in the context of the environment and class society. (Fraser, 2024)

At the center of the novels is a concern about the unbalanced relationship between owners and laborers. This concern manifests itself under the form of an exploitative use of labor, embodying paramount discourses on the inhuman conditions endured by the working poor. From a narrative perspective, Dickens and Gaskell both depict the struggles faced by workingmen against an oppressive system that



overwhelmingly disadvantages them. Definitionally, Hard Times and North and South reveal a commonality that industrialization is contingent on a mass of physical labor; one that is nevertheless portrayed as undervalued and degrading (Anne Davis, 2015). Dickens, through the barrage of binaries drawn in Hard Times, expands on the potentially harmful social consequences that can emerge from such a monolithic view. Conversely, Gaskell allows her characters to express a wider range of nuanced individual opinions on industrialization and the distribution of wealth within industrial communities. However, both authors ultimately return to the lament that the pernicious industrial system in place allows one to prosper only at another's expense. (Fatima et al., 2021)

1.1. Background and Context

The Industrial Revolution brought many monumental changes to Britain. There were significant changes from an agrarian economy to industrial factories with the enhancement of steam power. By 1800, there were over 500 steam engines in use across Britain, yet by 1840 that number had reached 4000 (Anne Davis, 2015). Despite the amount of work that had been automated, there were still unacceptable working conditions for most, and only an elite few saw profits. As industry continued to grow in Britain, there was not a wealth increase for the majority. Instead there was a growth of poverty and environmental waste. The elite industrialists, who owned multi-level factories in polluted manufacturing towns, did not suffer from this waste. The urban working class, however, dwelt in unsanitary areas adjacent to factories, were surrounded by filth, disease, and damaged lungs. The British economy/hierarchy had changed to three classes that layered out above mills, factories, and looms (vulgar wealth), yet below them lay a sea of dirt, rags, and wretchedness. As written by one observer, the smoke of progress and feminism blackened the skies, painting even the sun itself a dull vulcan hue. By the 1840s, industrial society had claimed more victims in 25 years than the revolution of 100. Of course, complicating this were the reactions of the masses—the upper classes in particular. News of such “abattoirtowns” as Manchester- Birmingham feeds the anti-industrial argument, although elsewhere a similar situation of smokestacks, liveried carriages, and paired greys suits the industrial perspective. Thus, observations by politicians or intellectuals appear to be a complex blend of personal sentiment, facts, condescension, and perhaps even wishful thinking. The industrial revolution would be remarkably different. In the literary world, Charles Dickens vented his disdain towards individualism, taking his philosophy about hard times further than it had ventured. Elizabeth Gaskell saw only the best. With a hint of naiveté that could only have been Victorian, she likened working class tenements to a sweet cottage, beautiful in its family principle of son and wife looking cozier in rags. Loved by her mourners, Jenny was able to

parlay her “lame poor” persona into a lyric, peaceable beauty that was buried beneath the sod. (Acemoglu & Johnson, 2024)

2. Literature Review

One of the most widely recognized works of literature to present a critique of unsustainable industrial practices is Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*. *Hard Times* engages with industrialized society and addresses themes such as education, automation, and class struggles. Critics have claimed that the novel explores moral philosophy in response to utilitarian mindsets, while others have interpreted it as a commentary on the misuse of facts (Anne Davis, 2015). Margaret Cardwell offered a number of significant criticisms of *Hard Times*, some of which are considered in Section 3. More recently, Cardwell’s arguments have been explored in conjunction with the emerging environmental concerns of the Victorian Industrial Age, specifically the effects of cotton textile production in the North of England during this time. (Sjödin et al.2022)

Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* makes a similar critique of industrialization and contextualizes it in the societal effects, depicting the struggles and injustices faced by factory workers. It has been called “Gaskell’s most important work of social criticism.” The background of *North and South* involves the analysis of England’s economic status, social structure, and changes during the Industrial Revolution, which play important roles in the development of the characters and the story in the novel. The main character, Margaret Hale, is modeled upon the life of Gaskell’s long-time friend, Eliza Fox, who died of scarlet fever. The realistic characterizations, the deep insights into the working class, and the evocation of conflicts related to private situations, set *North and South* apart from other Victorian novels. Industrialization is central to the story, revealing Gaskell’s interest in and knowledge of economic, social, and political issues. In *North and South*, Gaskell emphasizes the unjust treatment of cotton workers, showing her firm grasp of labor problems. In 1851, Gaskell visited Manchester, which influenced the creation and content of her fourth substantial novel. She illustrated the conflict and mutual understanding between the employers and their employees. Either good or bad traits of capitalism are vividly depicted, as are the contradictions found in the operation of such a system. The literary achievement of *North and South* lies in Gaskell’s ability to emphasize both individuality and relationship, with personal and public interests in a specific context, and to focus attention on the disagreements and synthesis between opposing systems of values. At the conclusion of *North and South*, the hero and the heroine combine individual enthusiasm with social solidarity, showing a union, or harmonious system, which promotes and enriches each other. (Gold, 2021)

2.1. Historical Context of Industrial Revolution



Published serially in Household Words between 1854 and 1855, Charles Dickens' ninth novel, *Hard Times*, illustrates the adaptation of the English industrial status quo and the condonable human suffering it produced. A few years later, in 1855, serial publication of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* in Household Words provided further scrutiny of the industrial period and chronicled similar abuses in the fictional town of Milton. In *Plymothian Review*, Virginia Brackett presents *North and South* as "a socially significant novel that examines contemporary issues such as worker-management relations," the likes of which, she argues, are overlooked by literary scholars who focus elsewhere. Similarly, she insists that *Hard Times* makes a similar statement. Both authors, themselves sympathizers of the working class, produced novels revealing unchecked industrial practices and insensitive outlooks on the overworked, disease-afflicted common people of Victoria's England (Anne Davis, 2015). Careful readers will quickly discern that the texts have more in common than similar childbirths in Household Words, serialization dates, and related reviews by John Forster (1845-1913). There are ample defensible reasons to believe Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* are significant social allegories of industrialism pertaining to comparative abandonment in an aggressively industrialized England. The primary purpose of this paper is to analyze and support this claim. However, for the sake of doing so, some didactic background is essential. Patterns emerge for the sake of the review and critique of establishment and history emerging from the industrial period engender the ill-fated logic of the downwards spiraling state to be found in *North and South* and *Hard Times*. Small sketches on Victorian factory acts and public response to industrial morality serve to amplify the position, and a data-listing of the texts' comments pertinency to 41 sample categories of industrial social history is enclosed. (Dupovac, 2022)

3. Themes of Unsustainable Industrial Practices

The titles of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* declare the industrial imperatives that are the driving force of each novel, laying bare the authors' intention to evaluate hardened attitudes towards the costs of such development (Anne Davis, 2015). In both works, industrialization is depicted as damaging to the environment; soot stains Louis' vulnerable gardens an unnatural and irreversible black, while Coketown's smog leaves everything it touches tasteless and dirty. The damage being wrought on the natural landscape by industrial expansion is signaled early in each text, setting an ur-text for the environmental novels that proliferated in the transmission age. Elaborate description of the aesthetic consequences of such pollution are juxtaposed by the imagined alternative: the pastoral landscapes which both fall victim to industrial expansion. Indeed, in both novels, industries are shown to feed upon the living in the grotesque image of overdressed workers consumed as fodder for inhuman



machines. A sensory satire present in both texts interrupts the narrative's speech act to raise the spectre of such a mode of consumption, with Gaskell speculating on the palatability of passengers as food in a time of hard travel and Dickens relating an over-imaginative discussion between Gradgrind and Bounderby on the gastronomic possibilities of bodily reformation. It is frequently these ceaselessly indented, mindless and replaceable workers-drones that fuel such feeding. The social and political consequence of an industrial development sustained by such exchange is clearly marked in North and South, with the mutinous, enslaved millions of Ireland condemned within the nostalgia of a secure and more vital past; insinuation for what is threatened by the south's own exploitative industrialism and consumer avarice. The text concludes support for the violent response this clearly opposing set of industrial practices provokes. (Usman & Balsalobre-Lorente, 2022)

3.1. Exploitation of Workers

In both *Hard Times* and *North and South*, the exploitation of workers is a central issue that weighs heavy over their characters and society. Both novels share a preoccupation with labor conditions of the mid-nineteenth century, presenting them through and appealing to the experience of individuals and communities (Anne Davis, 2015). Mary Barton, Boucher, Stephen Blackpool, Josiah Bounderby, Tom Gradgrind, and Rachel stand for workers confronted by the cruel machinery of reactors, employers, and goods. Issues such as strikes, living conditions, poverty—among others, are portrayed in them through various perspectives and voices. The exploitation of workers is shown within the factory, at home, and in the public sphere. Workers experience the alienating process of being turned into machines, their strength no longer being needed as machinery takes the upper hand. However, *North and South* goes further, utilizing settings, images, and metaphors to emphasize the physical violence of industrial practices, affecting body and spirit. Industrial towns are depicted as Hell itself, where only noise, fog, darkness, and figures running frantic in all directions can be perceived. In *North and South*, the condition of a worker's lodging is systematically related to the employer's position. The workers' houses of Milton overshadow the big city of Coketown, dirty, unhealthful, and miserable. Just as in *Hard Times*, Gaskell also uses an indirect and ambivalent discourse to insinuate the ascendancy role played by masters in relation to living conditions of their employees. (Montgomery and Baglioni 2021)

Nonetheless, hers goes further, pointing out moral challenges and duties. In this respect, the moral landscape of both novels is worth inter-textually looking at. The continuous critique of industrial practices in *Hard Times* and *North and South* is strongly intertwined with moral values. As characters and narrators reflect on daily dilemmas and strive for dignity and a sense of right, their struggle is also a claim for social justice. Bounderby, Gradgrind, and the masters in *North and South* are associated with economic systems that result in human and social issues. Northern

masters are seen as a whole, thriving on gains that ignore human costs, preserving commercial secrets to hide the exploitation of the workers and the lack of due rights of the sensitive, body and soul working class. The gradual process by which Nell's society becomes aware of the degradation, and illness affecting the North and South workers illustrates the novel's concern with the complexity of social issues. True to life, moral concerns are shown to be prompted by and to lead to a broad analysis of how institutions protect or fail individuals and groups. The theme of worker exploitation is shared by *Hard Times* and *North and South*; nevertheless, it is developed in quite different ways, reflecting different views of industrial practices above all. However, the comparative insights between Nell's and Sissy's characters underline the underlying connections between economic systems and blight. (Moersdorf et al.2024)

4. Character Analysis

An examination of both Victorian novels provides an investigation into their critiques on the social and economic implications of industrialization. The main focus is a comparative analysis of the character dynamics and growth in *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens and *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell, and how these characters operate as literary devices to explore and critique the consequences of unsustainable industrial practices in the Victorian age. (Govender et al.2023)

With respect to a comparative analysis of *Hard Times* and *North and South*, thus far research has focused on computational analysis predicting characters in both novels as well as the importance of weather in the narrative setting. However, the individual character dynamics, decisions, and growth in each novel are particularly significant in their representation of differing and complementary facets of opposition to industrialization. A comprehensive exploration of character arc and portrayal thus forms an essential section and literary basis for better comparative analysis. Character development in *Hard Times* is largely a reflection of a cognitive and moral stance towards industrialization, while there is a great deal of character growth in *North and South* as well. (Shi et al., 2022)

This piece aims to analyze the characters and their representation as both distinct human beings and literary instruments serving greater social and personal ambitions. Its conception revolves around the idea that the examination of characters must be one that seeks to investigate their motivations, decisions, and growth both as individuals and as facets of a greater social commentary on the Industrial Revolution (IR). The portrayal of these figures does not merely constitute a device of characterizations and storylines but a full, enlightening engagement with the positions and arguments that Dickens and Gaskell strive to render for the reader (Anne Davis, 2015).

4.1. Josiah Bounderby in *Hard Times*



In one simple, yet scathing conversation, Mrs. Pegler captures all aspects of Josiah Bounderby's character that Dickens found so vile — his arrogant selfishness and his exploitative falsity (Terci, 2015). The character embodies the idea of the self-made man — having started life as a lowly bank employee and rising to be the wealthiest man in both Bounderby and Gradgrind's lives — therefore espousing the very ideals that embody successful capitalism. Yet Bounderby's portrayal in the rest of the novel constructively unravels the very notion of being self-made. Much like the government he supports in *Hard Times*, Cryptic and often contradictory "facts" are Bandmaster's stock and trade; the more acutely they are examined, the less they hold up. The character is the source of his own problems. His ardent need to believe his own PR prevents him from the more moral counsel that such doubts would give rise to and as such, he is led down the path of depicted noble ruin. His tragic flaw — much like his ticked hat — is that he is inextricable attached to the oppressive system of industrial capitalism and as such, when it falls, brandishes his character shattering hubris. (Chun, 2022)

In many ways, Dickens is slightly more positive about Gradgrind than he is about Bounderby in that his interaction with the other classes is, while exploitative (in the guise of his marriage to Louisa), less destructive (in the form of bank failures in Bounderby's case). Gradgrind is still a cause for the breakdown of Steople's health — as can be seen in their conversation in volume II, chapter VII — but in such moments he is a representative of the unjust social structure and is there before somewhat less contemptible. Bounderby's glee at causing the public failure of the fives in the rig world, certainly does not further endear him to the mental. That Dickens saw this aspect of industrial society burgeoning from the tax on income that the government of the day imposed upon the lower classes to be the most damaging effect of industrialism. It is the one occurrence — other than Pallid's argument with Slack bridge — that is recorded and revered by the narrator as having actually restoring Coketown to some sense of what it once — somewhat paradoxically — was. Indeed the collapse of the bank and the revelations concerning the origin of Bounderby's wealth do lead to some scrutiny of the moral failures of industry itself. However, such inquisition is relatively short-lived and by the final chapter, while some concessions are made to the working class: "No monied consideration could have required," the Honorary grad grind to do his betrayal, Bastable is still in business while after the initial collapse of the mills. Dickens — and by extension Gradgrind, are more interested in finishing with the "hands" — one their humiliation has been public enough — than considering the what state the town will be left in. (Smith, 2023)

5. Conclusion

In examining Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, one can see how the nineteenth-century novel began interrogating the



Industrial Revolution in its works (Anne Davis, 2015). By using literary analysis, the consequences of unsustainable industrial practices — such as time over money, factuality versus emotions, and profit at the expense of humanity — are explored and exposed. To overview the importance of sustainability critically, analyses of these novels uncover how exploitative labor practices infect, and environmental negligence devastates, the individual affect self and society, including highlighting these novels' critiques in today's modern discussion over enhancing industrial practices and sustainability critically. This research suggests that the unsustainability of relying on unrestrained industrial practices, as identified by these literary works, and continually linked to the Industrial Revolution's exploitative consequences and negative impacts on individuals and society at large, from the Victorian era to today's globalization process in Western culture. In broader terms, the consequences of these unsustainable economic practices are: First, it triggers an exploitation grievance, highlighting the key point of the criticism in the industrial system; Second, this exploitation feedback suggests that the focus on shareholder welfare free-speech dialogues will not only be counterproductive but maintain only past sins; The third, critical, harmful effects on society and the environment are cited in the form of declining social capital and rigorous damage to the Victorian natural ethos of society; Finally, those engaged into sustainable country-wide development argue for a review of both industrial and financial market practices to refocus them around a re-founded code of conduct that incorporates the nuances of the critique expressed by these literary works. Beyond approaches to economic development and industrial policies, the results of this research suggest that an extensive understanding of past critiques can contribute to how modern capitalism is managed ethically and in conformity with welding economic, social and industrial conduct.

5.1. Key Findings and Implications for Modern Society

Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* offer a vivid critique of 19th-century industrial practices. These valuable contributions to the conversation concerning industrial practices and ethics are still engaging and informative for modern readers. An analysis of key elements and thematic preoccupations in *Hard Times* and *North and South* reveals recurring and interconnected patterns of exploitation and environmental degradation as prevalent and ongoing challenges during the Industrial Revolution in England. Furthermore, application of the historical perspective provided by these works to modern global issues reveals that many criticisms remain highly pertinent to the current world industrial system. In order to inspire more productive and sustainable industrial practices, the allegorical nature of this critique is carefully examined, alongside the implications that the current neoliberal system is neither as morally inert nor historically unprecedented as often suggested. Because a more equitable, non-

exploitative, and sustainable economic policy is not only practically possible but in fact historically evident, an active critique and reevaluation of the current globalized industrial system is called for, significantly informed by the historical insights and moral lessons offered by literature. Administering and receiving this wider and weightier critique is proposed as a collective and global ethical responsibility. Efforts could begin within the current system to mitigate some of the critique's more damning implications concerning contemporary and future human rights abuses and environmental devastation. At base is an argument for the vital interconnectedness of literature and history in their ongoing quest for sustainable industrial ethics and practices. (Gold, 2021)

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